3: Mukherjea O. Y-4,5 (ca. 1933-1939) 1962
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The Economic Background of Santal life

"Where shall I get the rice to brew beer?" pleaded a Santal accused in an excise case answering a charge of distilling spirits. It was pointed out that no excise rules prevented him from fermenting "hàṇḍia," the home-made beer. "Where shall I get the rice?" the puzzling defence was hurled at the magistrate, sitting at the courts of Dumka, S. P.

Some time after, news trickled from Jamtara areas that some infuriated Santals ran after those who went to help them during a conflagration in their villages with bows and arrows, seeking to shoot them down. "We have nothing to eat, let fire take our houses too," was what they exclaimed, not that they could not understand the humanitarian services of the village fire-brigade.

Those were years of some scarcity no doubt, but the pictures afford us a glimpse of Santal economic life. They seem to have no power of resistance against a rainy day and think more of drinks to drown their sorrow, even if they have to infringe excise laws. In the Santal economic background poverty seems to loom large. No wonder that one of their folk-songs during the December Harvest Home has these telling lines:—

Dè ho durup'pè,[1]
Dè ho tèṅgònpè,

1 The full song has been incorporated in the chapter on Folk-poetry.

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776 nothing was really found. One Mangla Mañjhi
782 heard about it and it "roused his curiosity and cupidity." He now requisitioned the services of Bhima Naik, a famous exorcist, who decided upon human sacrifice to propitiate the deity guarding the treasure. Next, a lad named Chotrai was decoyed, his head severed, and the blood held in a small earthen pot and offered to the deity.

Basuki or Basumata

Apart from the hill and village spirits mentioned above, the Santals worship *Basuki* or *Basumata* for the welfare of agriculture, during the month of Ashar, with offerings of fowls and goats. Such
• [731] worships do not form a regular feature of the tribal calendar, but are occasional invocations during apprehended crop-failure.

Ancestor Spirits

769 If the idea of death has profoundly puzzled
761 humanity, the Santals are no exception to the rule. In their crude way, they have built up a theory regarding the disembodied spirits which regards the dead ancestors with religious awe and reverence.

769 Thus it is that we see that in all festivals, public or private, *Haṛamko* or *Buṛha-Buṛbi* (the old man

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and woman) are offered a cock and a hen respectively, together with a liberal share of rice-beer. During harvest festivals, like *Sohrae* or the Flower Festival (*Baha*), fowls are sacrificed in their honour with prayers so that the members of the tribe may have no diseases such as bowel-complaints. The reverence paid to the memory of the dead relatives by the Santals will also be amply illustrated by the fact that the departed spirits of the dead brothers and unmarried sisters receive supplementary worship, after the propitiation of *Burha-Burbi*.

Mischievous Spirits

Santals have about a number of mischievous minor spirits, who find a devilish delight in bringing epidemics to men or cattle, unless propitiated with appropriate rituals.

We came across three such representatives in the Santal pantheon, *Kalachandi*, a male spirit, and *Kalamahichandi* and *Nasòn-kudra*, both female evil spirits, as exercising an uncanny influence on the tribe. The offerings that please them are *Ibitipiti* (Oriya, a kind of worm), frogs, grass-hoppers, fowls, human blood, vermilion, sun-dried rice, powdered charcoal and burnt clay from ovens. It is noteworthy that earthen images are made to represent these deities. They are at first invoked in the

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CHAPTER X

MAGIC AND WITCH-CRAFT

In course of the previous chapter, we have given the reader some idea as to how the Santal mind reacts in the presence of the mysteries of life. We have seen that they have elaborate rituals to propitiate the deities, with whom they people this world. In the present chapter, we shall see how they deal with the super-normal phenomena. That "there are more things in heaven and earth" than is dreamt of in one's philosophy is the conclusion of puzzled humanity at large, and the Santals have their own special methods of dealing with them by magical practices.

To Remove Drought

When there is a drought, and the agricultural well-being of the tribe is thus threatened, several Santal villages combine together and subscribe funds for the propitiation of *Sima Bongas* (the boundary deities). Some men fall in a trance. These men, inspired with oracular powers, are requested to state reasons for the calamity that has befallen the tribe and to suggest remedies. Generally, the tribal troubles are hinted by those who impersonate the invisible gods, and solemn assurances are held out

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731 782 787 [793] that special offerings would be offered when rain falls. And when rains come on, the village-priest propitiates the boundary-deities with the promised rituals and sacrifices.

To Remove Village Illness

[776] When epidemics break out in the tribe, the village deities *Gram pat*, *Bisam Thakurani* (Hindu goddess, *Kali*), together with all the gods of the Holy Grove are invoked by the priest at the head of the tribe. The preliminary procedure of the worship is the same as noted above in connection with removal of droughts with the addition that the witches responsible for the calamity may be mentioned by the men in trance supposed to speak for the deity.

755 782 787 [776] When any member of a Santal household falls ill, the head of the house arranges for an invocation to the *Orak' Boṅga* (household deity). As a preliminary to the worship of the deity, some men fall in a hypnotic stupor, in which they are supposed to have oracular powers. Thereupon, the householder

755 782 787 539 asks the man in trance:—

Dè tabe gosane òkòe boṅga, òkòe buru, heken seteren, jaotya janama lie odong, tabe gosane pataganda sira ganda bil akan ate akan gosane.

Translation:—

"O thou deity! What god art thou? What

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women reply in chorus. So they go on till about 3 a. m. in the morning. 535

It must be added, however, that "Lagren" is a very stimulating dance, and on these occasions the youths and maids of the tribe get plenty of opportunities for love-making. Even the steps of the dance provide facilities for courtship, as the couples face side-ways and talk as they dance. And after the dances, parties in love retire into the woods. 535 832

The songs, sung on these occasions, are mostly love-songs. An illustration is given here:— [533] [539]

Nadiaka dhare dhare
Kahar bansi baje,
Hai hai òntare kandiche.
Akhite dekhini, kanetò sunini,
Hai hai, amar òntare kandiche.

(Translation)

On the banks of the river,
Whose lute plays?
Alas! the heart weeps.
I haven't seen with eyes,
Nor heard with ears.
Alas, my heart weeps!

Nabin Mañjhi, Headman of Muruda, Mayurbhanj, said that when there are no rains, there are certain "Lagren" songs in invocation to the Rain- 533 731 782 789 [115]

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god, which are sung to make the skies yield rain. One such sample is quoted below: —

Svarager hur hur
Prithimite dhula chilu urilò
Dhaner sisò chilu marilò
Manuser chati chilu phatilò he.

(Translation)

In the sky, clouds rumble, Oh god!
On the earth, dust flies.
Oh god! the ears of corn dry up.
The hearts of men are breaking, Oh god!

Dòn ènèc'

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[585]

This is danced during marriages generally. Mixed men and women choose their groups and form a lively circle. The women interlock their hands gracefully, whereas, men with *Nagera* and *Madal* stand in the centre forming an inner circle. As the music continues, the dancers advance two steps to the right in a general motion. Next, they gracefully extend each feet forward. Thus they dance for twenty minutes or so, while women sing in unison. When the dance finishes, it is now men's turn to sing, while women reply in a musical chorus. This goes on for some time, when again the drums resound; the countryside echoes and re-echoes with a merry din and the dance starts afresh.

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535 796 789 world. Various magical and imitative suggestions can be noticed in "Riñja" dances. Thus agricultural implements are represented by movements suggesting a smith hammering. Other movements show the dancers cutting jungles, giving a boundary to agricultural plots, milking cows, and even cock-crows are imitated to show that the house-holder should now rise from his bed and go to his field.

796 789 535 [73] [783] It was also stated that the Santals believe that if "Riñja" is not danced during Karam Puja, there will be no rain. In the dance movements, one can see that the dancers swing their right hand up and down, thus magically invoking rain. On other occasions, should a drought be apprehended, "Riñja" may be danced in the village *akhṛa* (the village dancing-yard) after purifying it with cow-dung and sprinkling *mithi* (a spice). This is undoubtedly a magical process to bring down rain on the earth.

Ḍaṇṭa ėnėc'

796 585 The next, "Ḍaṇṭa," is danced during the Harvest Festival (Sòhrae) and is a special preserve of the youths of the tribe. They form two circles with the musicians in the central position. A peculiarity of the dance is that in the beginning they step twice to the right and then twice to the

4; Biswas D, E-3, 4 (1931-1945) 1956
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the *Jahersthan* in the month of Asadh (June-July). *Naike* and his assistant *Kudum Naike* perform the function. Five fowls are sacrificed in the *Jahersthan*. After the function they cook these fowls and eat them. the heads of the fowls are taken by the *Naike* and *Kudum Naike*.

Hariar Sim: The Santals hold this festival at the time of the sprouting of rice, which takes place in the month of Sraban (July-August). Fowls are sacrificed to all the tribal and village deities and prayers are offered for a bountiful harvest.

Janthar Puja (Nawai) This festival is held in the month of Agrahayan (November-December) in the *Jahersthan* when the first gathering of the winter rice crop is offered Similarly the first gathering of the millets is offered in the sacred grove in the month of Bhadra (August-September) which the Santals call Irigrudli-nawai. The *Naike* reaps a little of the crop and offers to the village deities in the *Jahersthan*, and ties a twig round the five trees of the *Jahersthan* The *Naike* at the time of uttering prayer pours some milk on the offerings. Similar offerings are made by each householder of the village to the spirits of their ancestors.

Mak' More: This festival is observed by the Santals generally at intervals of five years or so in the *Jahersthan* as a result of vows made at times of distress or epidemics. Fowls are sacrificed and a white goat is sacrificed in the name of the village community to *Mokroko*, one of the five deities of Santals which they worship in the *Jahersthan*. The flesh of the sacrified

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CHAPTER 3

THE RHYTHM OF DAILY LIFE

THE rhythm of daily life in an agricultural community grows out of the close relationship between the activities of man and the cycle of nature. Work and recreation depend upon the seasons and their contrasts of heat and cold, of dry and wet weather, of springtime and harvest. The Santals distinguish three seasons during the year, each possessing a characteristic climate. The "cold days" last from November to March. The rice harvest is gathered during the earlier part of this season; food is therefore plentiful and people relax. The skies for the most part remain clear, and the absence of movement in the air causes a blue haze to hang over the villages in the evenings, formed by the wood smoke of the cooking fires. The nights are cold; morning and evening the folk crouch over small fires in the open to warm themselves. Sometimes, when the wind blows off the distant Himalayas, the days are also cold. The new year begins at this time. Then come the "heat days", when the west wind scorches the skin during the midday hours and often the nights too are unbearably hot. From time to time a storm blows up from the north-west in the late afternoon, stirring the dust and then laying it and cooling the earth with welcome raindrops, while loud claps of thunder are heard and vivid flashes of lightning chase across the sky. During these days the forest trees shed their leaves and take on a garment of new green, flowering trees make gay patterns against the deep blue of the sky, while both men and women spend much time in the forests, the former hunting and fishing, the women gathering fruits, leaves and roots. Springs, streams and wells dry up, and many women have to go long distances to obtain water for domestic needs. Then come the "heavy-rain days", which last from the end of June till October, the time of the south-west monsoon on which so much depends. Eagerly the Santals watch the signs of the sky, working for long hours until all the rice seedlings have been planted out; then rain and sun are left to bring the increase, while men watch and tend the fields.

The year is also divided into two parts, one of which, the season from June until the new harvest has been reaped, is known as "hunger-time". This name is an eloquent reminder of the danger of starvation; even in normal years the Santal's holding of land is insufficient to support his family. The years

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The years pass, indistinguishable one from another except when famine or other calamity makes a landmark on which the memory will fasten in the years to come. Ten years ago many of the older men dated their birth according to whether they were born before or after "Seventy-two", the Bengali year 1272, when a disastrous famine broke up many families. Another memorable year was the year of the influenza epidemic that followed the close of the 1914-18 war, and young people today can calculate their age in relation to the year of the *malot*, or epidemic. The division of the year into months is somewhat vague, for whereas the only names for the months now current are the twelve months of the Bengali calendar, the Santal reckoning is based on the moon. As one man remarked: "We sometimes have to slip a month." In 1939, when this statement was made, there was confusion in the Santal calendar between *Bhador* (the Bengali month extending through a part of August and September) and *San*, the month that precedes it. Names are given to the phases of the moon according to its shape. Thus I was told: "The *Ende* (the Ind festival which in West Bengal is associated with Dharma worship) is observed during the month of *Bhador*, when the moon is shaped like an open umbrella."

The days of the week also have Bengali names, and the day is divided into periods, the names of which relate in some cases to the meals taken, in other cases to the duties which have to be performed or to a more general association of the time. When Santals wish to make an appointment at a particular time it is sufficient to point to the position in the sky where the sun will have climbed. Some time before dawn it is "little cockcrow", and this is followed by "cockcrow". *Basiam*, the time when breakfast is taken, is divided into three parts: "child *basiam*", "*basiam*" and "bent *basiam*". The word *basiam*, meaning "leftover", is a reminder that the breakfast consists of a small quantity of cold rice or rice gruel, cooked with the evening meal on the previous day and kept for the morning, when it is eaten with a little salt. The late afternoon is called the "time when women draw water". One way of describing a short period is to relate it to the time taken in boiling a pot of rice. Work is continued until the shadow of a house or a tree falls across a particular spot. It happens frequently that children draw a line outside their schoolhouse, so that when the shadow of the building falls across the line they know it is time to go home. A man who was in the habit of sleeping in

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797 648 The missionaries at Sarenga became familiar at a very early stage with the facts of exploitation of the Santals. One result of this is that missionaries have been foremost in bringing and keeping the facts before the notice of the authorities. The evidence of missionaries is recorded in McAlpin's report.[1] Further direct measures have been taken to better the condition of the Santals both as tenants and as cultivators. During the period when the law was of little use as a safeguard of the rights of cultivators it seemed that the only way in which they could be helped was by acquiring landlord rights over the Santals and so assuring them of a square deal. In the Santal Parganas and elsewhere the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches has acquired a large *zemindari*, or estate, which includes a tea estate in Assam, as many of the Santals in its area migrated to the tea gardens. At Sarenga during the twenty years following the establishing of the mission, landlord rights in a number of small properties on which there were Santal tenants were acquired in order to save the Santals from eviction or from having to pay greatly enhanced rents. A later generation of missionaries has frequently had cause to wish that it could be freed from the burden of these commitments, but it is difficult to see how they could have been avoided if the people were to be helped in the one matter which affected their living more than any other. Though the situation today is very different, the tradition then established still leads Santals to look to the Christian Church for advice and protection. "As the hot season proceeded", we read in one report, "the hunger situation became serious for many people. We were occupied with building work in the compound and a young men's confirmation class which we had for some weeks, but our thoughts were also taken up with the problem of getting famine relief of some kind or other. And anxiously looking for some efforts to be made by government to meet the tremendous need, we finally got information about the loan arrangement (the Land Improvement Loan Fund) advancing money for buying seed and thus giving hopes of a harvest the following autumn. Before the rains started this loan money was realized from the police stations, and every landowner was supposed to have a chance to receive some. But just returning from the hills we had the Santals coming into the compound in large numbers every day complaining that they were refused the loan help. After much consultation a deputation of some elected villagers

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[1] M. C. McAlpin, *A Report on the Condition of the Santals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and North Balasore*, Bengal Government, 1909.

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was sent to the Sub-Divisional Officer with a petition. The result was negative. After still more deliberation we went to Dumka and with our Secretary's help placed the petition before the Deputy Commissioner. This was immediately granted. A few days after this nearly two thousand more of the population in this area, 80 per cent. of which is stated to be Santals, got their little share of the promised loan."[1]

At Sarenga as elsewhere the necessary preoccupation with the problem of daily bread led to other developments in policy. In addition to becoming a landlord the mission also became a cultivator and employer of labour, thus being in a position to introduce improvements in farming methods to the people in a practical manner and not merely by preaching. Furthermore, something had to be done about the problem of debt that was crippling the Santals. Loans were granted to individuals, and in this matter, too, a later generation of missionaries, which is wise after the event, is inclined to question the wisdom of what was done. An attempt was made in the early years to give loans to cultivators at reasonable rates of interest through the organization of a grain bank, but most of the beneficiaries, unaccustomed to any but the most overbearing and unscrupulous behaviour from their moneylenders in the past, did not see the urgency of loan repayment, and in later years there has been an attempt to establish co-operatives on a sounder basis. Some of the loans given in the early years in order to save land for a family were on a scale that a subsequent generation that has had to try to realize them can only regard as inordinately lavish. The need for this kind of help has been greatly diminished since protective legislation came into force.

If missionaries were compelled to work for economic justice often against their will, they found other spheres open to them which they were eager to enter. Everywhere they have been the pioneers of education for the Santals; until recently they were almost the only agencies in the field. In the district of Midnapore the American Baptist Mission has, by a delegation of authority by the government, been almost solely responsible for the administration of funds and the supervision of schools. These range from the village primary school with a single teacher to a Santal High School for boys where they may sit for the matriculation examination of Calcutta University. In the Bankura district a missionary has always been a member of the Santal Education

[1] *The Seventy-Fifth Annual Report of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches*, 1941, pp. 46–47.